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SUBJECT: STUDENT PROTEST SPARKED HALABJAH VIOLENCE

REF: KIRKUK 69

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

[¶1.](#) (C) SUMMARY. The KRG had denied permission for the March 16 protests at Halabjah. The KRG Deputy PM had agreed to student protest organizers' demands the night before, but was too late to prevent the violent March 16 Halabjah protests. Protestors were mostly male students from Halabjah, and represented a variety of political parties and universities. The protestors were demonstrating against what they viewed as government officials' using the Halabjah monument to collect foreign assistance for themselves instead of for rebuilding the city. The protestors calculated that if they destroyed the monument, Halabjah visitors would instead have to enter the town and see that the government had not used their donations to rebuild the city. END SUMMARY.

[¶2.](#) (C) This is the first in a series of cables reporting an in-depth look at the March 16 violent protests in Halabjah. This cable lays out the events leading up to and the day of the protests. The other two cables will report on the subsequent security crackdown and prospects for violence elsewhere in the Kurdish Region of Iraq. RC(A) and IPAQ on March 28 met with Yerivan Adham Sa'id, a freelance press interpreter and native of Halabjah, who was present during the entirety of the Halabjah events and supported the demonstrations. Sa'id was the freelance interpreter for the March 17 New York Times story, a subsequent National Public Radio story and was a major source for reftel.

The Organizers

[¶3.](#) (SBU) Sa'id said that a week before the Halabjah events of March 16, the main organizers of the demonstrations - about 10 students - asked local PUK officials for permission to demonstrate peacefully by the Halabjah monument during the annual ceremony commemorating the Ba'ath regime's chemical attacks on the city. The PUK officials rejected the request, saying that the timing was inappropriate, since international delegations (Italian and Japanese) were planning to attend the ceremony. The officials warned that any protests would be considered illegal and liable to punishment.

[¶4.](#) (SBU) Halabjah's mayor took the organizers to see KRG Deputy Prime Minister Omar Fattah on March 15, the evening before the scheduled protests, probably in an effort to

forestall the protests. The students presented a "memorandum" in which the students demanded the KRG build a university in Halabjah, construct a youth center, build new homes for Anfal victims, pave roads, and compensate family members of Anfal victims. Fattah agreed to their demands and wrote "for implementation" on the memo. Once they saw this, the organizers opted out of the demonstrations to rid themselves of responsibility. (Note: Although the organizers did not attend the demonstrations, their plans to protest were still well enough in place to attract a big turnout on March 16. End Note.) Sa'id said the organizers were Halabjah natives and were a mix of KDP and PUK supporters who attended the universities of As Sulaymaniyah, Kou Senjaq, and Salah ad Din (Arbil).

Protestors Mostly Young Male Students

¶5. (SBU) On March 16 - the day of the ceremony - approximately 20 students arrived around 8 a.m. and began demonstrating near the monument. The number of protestors rapidly increased. The group consisted mostly of male students between the ages of 14 and 30, with a much smaller portion of older participants. Like the organizers, most of the protestors were students from the universities of As Sulaymaniyah, Kou Senjaq, and Salah ad Din (Arbil), who were home on break for the Halabjah ceremony. The families of Halabjah victims - wearing the customary all black - originally came to participate in the ceremony, but many eventually joined the protests.

Demonstrations Turn Violent

¶6. (C) The first signs that the demonstrations were turning violent occurred around 9 a.m. when the students began burning tires and shouting for the visitors to leave Halabjah. The police confronted the protestors at that time and tried to break up what Sa'id said were then around 1,000 people near the monument. The police tried to force the protestors away from the monument by hitting them with their Kalashnikovs and firing

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gunshots above them. Approximately three students and two journalists were beaten at that time, and the crowd dispersed from the monument. The actions of the PUK security forces, however, only fueled the protestors' anger.

¶7. (SBU) By 10 a.m., the crowd was getting much larger, and protestors began lying on the road approximately one kilometer in front of the monument to prevent visitors from attending the ceremony. After about 30 minutes on the road, the crowd started to move back towards the monument, but did not get very far before some in the crowd convinced most to continue to block the road. The students at this time began chanting slogans such as, "We will not allow robbers into Halabjah," and "Halabjah died for you, but you do not give Halabjah services." Many of the protestors were holding signs that displayed the money sign, suggesting that government officials had been pocketing Halabjah donations for themselves.

¶8. (SBU) By 11 a.m., more than 6,000 protestors were present. The protestors abandoned their strategy to block the road and returned to the monument. When the students arrived near the monument at around 11:30 a.m., PUK security forces again shot over their heads, only angering the protestors even more. The protestors scattered but began to attack property and throw stones at the security forces. At this point, the government officials there to attend the ceremony fled, and the security forces shot at the crowd, injuring two more students. The protestors stormed the monument when the security forces shot at the crowd.

Destroying the Monument

¶9. (SBU) Sa'id said the protestors calculated that if they destroyed the monument, Halabjah visitors would instead enter

the town and see that the government had not used their donations to rebuild the city. Security forces withdrew from the scene, as the protestors destroyed virtually everything inside and around the monument. According to Sa'id, the protestors, however, did not destroy the room with photos of Anfal victims, even though the PUK claimed they did. Sa'id claimed that the protestors purposefully left the pictures on the walls because many of the photos belonged to their relatives and friends.

¶10. (SBU) The protestors threw chairs through the glass, destroyed computers and technical equipment, and set the monument on fire by carrying inside the fuel tank from the museum's generator, splashing around the fuel and lighting it. After having withdrawn about 3 kilometers, the security forces at some point returned and began shooting randomly again at the protestors going in and out of the monument. The security forces at this time killed a 17-year-old student and injured five others. The crowd dispersed and went into the town to destroy a new PUK office that was not yet finished. Peshmerga forces, however, were guarding the office and fired at crowd to keep them away - no one was injured, and the crowd dispersed. By 12:30 or 1 p.m., the riots had ended. No ambulances appeared; families took victims to hospitals on their own.

Comment

¶11. (C) We doubt that Fattah was ready to build a new university in Halabjah on the suggestion of 10 students. We suspect, though, that the combination of threats against protestors and (sometimes empty) promises is the KRG's normal method to prevent demonstrations. Sa'id's account that the protestors were angry enough to conduct destructive acts in the face of what appears to have been somewhat aggressive PUK security forces is noteworthy. The protestor's choice of attacking a memorial to the past may reflect the public's rejection of the argument they still owe loyalty to the PUK and KDP for past glories rather than for present day services. While a strategy of destroying the monument to prompt Halabjah visitors to enter the city and see its true conditions is plausible, the actual attack probably grew from the fury of the moment rather than planning. Sa'id's report that both PUK and KDP supporters were protesting together is an interesting trend.

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